

“Missing from the Curriculum”

BY STANLEY HAUERWAS

Published in *Commonweal*, September 23, 1994. ©1994 Commonweal Foundation, reprinted with permission. For Subscriptions, www.commonwealmagazine.org. This is article is a review of *The Soul of the American University: From Protestant Establishment to Established Nonbelief*, by George Marsden Oxford University Press

In her inaugural address as the president at Duke University, Nan Keohane confessed that it was only after she had agreed to become Duke's new president that she discovered Duke's motto is *Eruditio et Religio*. She observed that she was initially made uneasy by this since the motto has an archaic sound and "the emphasis on religion seemed hard to square with the restless yearning for discovery, the staunch and fearless commitment to seek for truth wherever truth may be found that is the hallmark of a great university."

In this wonderful new book on the relationship between Protestantism and the American university, George Marsden helps us understand how universities founded by the Protestant establishment now inaugurate presidents that are a bit embarrassed by the past platitudes that marked the relationship between Protestantism and the American university. According to Marsden, Protestantism created the American university and then was devoured by its own creation. This was not the result of a secular conspiracy but rather came from the internal characteristics of American Protestantism. Of course there were some ardent secularists who wished to distance the university from its Protestant roots, but the disestablishment of Protestantism came largely as an unintended consequence of decisions that in their day seemed reasonable and laudable.

The loss of any significant Christian presence in universities was ironically the result of the Protestant project to create a Protestant America. As long as America could be assumed to be culturally Protestant such a project seemed coherent. However, with the increasing diversity of



American culture, the Protestant "universalism" necessary to respond as well as to maintain a hegemony over such diversity, became the ideology that undermined any particular expression of strong Christian convictions. The very logic of the nonsectarian ideal which the Protestant establishment promoted for public life finally dictated that liberal Protestantism itself should be moved to the periphery along with other religious perspectives such as Catholicism.

The story of the disestablishment of Protestantism is as complex as the story of America itself. I can only admire Marsden's ambition and courage to undertake such a grand narrative. Obviously, Marsden will be critiqued for his interpretation of what happened at Harvard in this or that century or what he has left out of the story. Yet he tells the story with such winsome good humor, good sense, and with the lively style that we have come to expect from him that such criticism can only appear minor given the extraordinary nature of this book.

Marsden begins with the founding of Harvard College in the seventeenth century, and the rest of the story is largely confined to the East Coast with occasional glances toward California and the great state universities of the Midwest. He knows he cannot encompass the stories of the Protestant liberal arts colleges and/or state universities, but his decision to so restrict his narrative is justified by his argument that those universities, through the graduate education they provided, determined the narratives of so many other institutions.

Seventeenth-century Harvard inherited all the tensions of Christian higher learning in Europe. Embodying the medieval ideal of a unified Christendom, American Puritans reproduced the inevitable tension that is built into the assumption that the church and the civil state can have common interest. Such a presumption was exemplified by "the new moral science" borrowed from the Scottish common sense moralists that became the content of the capstone course taught to all undergraduates. A rationally based universal ethic thus became the means to create a Christian civilization. The potential conflict between the Christian particularisms presumed in the great eighteenth-century revivals so influential at Yale and Princeton and the universalism of the Enlightenment ideals never materialized. Rather, they were seen as complementary elements for the task of creating a Christian civilization.



With the development of seminaries for ministry training, a division of labor was established that freed colleges from being ecclesiastical institutions. The university was at once a denominational and public institution for the education of a Christian citizenry. Harvard, after all, was created by the civil government.

The heart of Marsden's story comes in part 2 which concerns the transformation of the Protestant college into the modern research university. There were two primary visions for reform of American education: one represented by Francis Wayland of Brown and the other by Henry Tappan, who served as chancellor of the University of Michigan from 1852-63. Wayland sought to redirect the university toward a more vital social role in an American society increasingly determined by market considerations. Tappan represented the opening of the church-founded universities to the Enlightenment sciences represented by Germany. Deeply influenced by his own education in Prussia, Tappan began the long road toward the professionalization of academic life into disciplinary subjects. American pragmatism and responsiveness to market considerations blended with the new science's alleged objectivity to produce the university as we now know it.

Daniel Coit Gilman's Johns Hopkins became the norm for all higher education. The work of building such institutions was assumed to be Christian since it was presumed that the best hopes of America were equivalent to what it meant to be a Christian. Marsden notes that Gilman, as well as his counterparts in business, the professions, science, and technology, did not see the professionalization of the university as a threat to Christianity since they thought the new "methodological secularization" drew its inspiration from the Christian attempt to uplift humanity. Gilman assumed "science" simply was the expression of Christianity since the aim of science was progress in the development of mankind.

In part 3 Marsden helps us see how these developments led to the loss of any explicit religious considerations in the modern university. Universities now no longer served American denominations but provided technical expertise for a capitalist society. In an extremely illuminating chapter on the development of the "elusive idea of academic freedom," Marsden helps us see how the university became an even more faithful servant to the state than to the church. William Jennings Bryan,



during the Scopes trial, rightly argued that if Christianity was no longer going to provide direction for the university, it was by no means clear what philosophy would replace it.

Marsden explores such questions in the last chapters of the book, wonderfully titled "A Church with the Soul of a Nation" and "Liberal Protestantism without Protestantism." In effect, he helps us see that Protestantism had in fact created a nation while in the universities it had become unintelligible to itself. Marsden calls this the "catch 22" of liberal Protestantism--that is, the more Protestantism identified itself with a social mission of forming an ethos for America the less it could be explicitly Christian.

Running through Marsden's story is his commentary on how Catholicism remained the great "other" in this Protestant project. Lyman Beecher of Yale, in his 1835 tract *Plea for the West*, justified the mission of the Christian college to spread Protestant Christianity into the untamed wilds of the West as necessary to prevent Catholic domination through immigration. Disclaiming any intention to discriminate against Catholics, Beecher welcomed them if they just acted like any other American denomination. "Let the Catholics mingle with us as Americans and come with their children under the fell action of our common schools and republican institutions, and we are prepared cheerfully to abide the consequences," he wrote. Yet as Marsden notes, this Protestant hegemonic discourse at least left Catholics with a resource that Protestants lacked—i.e. universities with substantial religious identities. Of course, there is every indication that Catholic universities are now trying as fast as they can to be "just like us."

I have only one substantial question to raise about Marsden's account. Marsden rightly helps us appreciate the role that "methodological secularization" played in the professionalized disciplines that now constitute the modern university. Yet does not his book betray the same kind of methodological secularization? For example, nowhere does Marsden suggest that the story he tells may in fact be God's judgment against the godlessness of America or the vapid character of Protestantism. In the introduction he tells us that when he taught at Calvin College he saw how important beliefs about God, God's creation, and God's will could be for scholarship not just in theology but in other dimensions of human thought and relationships. Yet other than his avowal



that he is a Christian, I find it hard to discover anything in this book that would not make Marsden a well-regarded academic historian. He accepts the presupposition and practices of secular historiography.

I suspect Marsden feels some sympathy with such criticism. For what his book helps us see is that the challenge before Christians today is not whether a Christian university is possible, but whether the kind of knowledge and practices that characterize such a university would be an alternative to what is taught in non-Christian universities. Marsden ends his book with a call for institutional variety among universities like that suggested by Alasdair Macintyre in the last chapter of *Three Rival Versions of Moral Inquiry*. That is surely a good place to begin, but the question remains whether Christian universities could produce a historiography in which God appears as something more than a God belief by some people—that is, a god of the gaps. In short, the problem with *Eruditio et Religio* is the et. If the Christian university is to have anything interesting to say, it will do so because the knowledges that are shaped by its practices help us see that God matters.

